

ADOPTING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM – LABOUR'S RESPONSE TO THE NATIONAL QUESTION

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The late 1980s has seen a re-emergence of the debate within the Labour Party around the Scottish Question. For the first time since those heady days of the late 1970s Scottish political columnists have regularly 'dined out' on analysis and speculation surrounding the issues. It is a frequent source of frustration to players in the political game – of whatever persuasion – that the recording of such events by the media and academia alike often provides a sanitised or even inaccurate account of events. The pages which follow are an account of Labour's attempt to grapple with the national question from the perspective of someone who is both a student of, and participant in, Scottish Labour Politics. No doubt many will disagree with both the contents and conclusions of the present contribution – not least of all within the party itself – but every attempt has been made to ensure that the facts *do* get in the way of a good story.

Politics is a fickle business. Yesterday's heresy can very quickly become today's shibboleth. The Declaration of Sovereignty signed at the first Constitutional Convention meeting on The Mound is a case in point. Twelve months prior to the meeting many, even (or perhaps especially) in the Labour Party, would have thought it barely credible that Westminster loyalists such as Donald Dewar, John Maxton and John Smith – not to mention old style anti-devolutionists like Brian Wilson, Bob Hughes and Eric Milligan – would have been willing to throw the collective might of the People's Party behind the assertion that the will of the Scottish people was sovereign over that of a Westminster Government. The significance of Labour giving its official backing to such a concept should not be underestimated. The party's conversion to, and eventual participation in, the Scottish Constitutional Convention marked a watershed in its attitude to the question of Scottish Home Rule.

In the immediate run up to the 1987 General Election a few dissident voices raised the spectre of "the Doomsday Scenario". The mere contemplation that Labour could sustain a third consecutive Westminster defeat was considered by Labour's establishment to be heretical or, worse still, tantamount to conspiring to such an outcome. Hence the calls of ultra-devolutionists such as Denis Canavan MP, and others, for Labour to develop a fallback strategy to deal with such a result were brushed aside.

On the face of it, the 1987 Election result should have been, and for a short time undoubtedly was, of greater concern to Chester Street than Keir Hardie House. After all, here was a party of government who had been reduced to such an extent that they could barely even staff the limited organs of Scottish government through the Scottish Office. Conversely Labour had consolidated its dominance of Scottish politics. One party had power – but little popular support – the other party had popular support but no legitimate means of exercising power.

Labour had a choice, with 50 MPs to the Tories' 10 and a virtual monopoly of Scottish Local Government, they could either challenge the Tories' mandate in Scotland and throw away the Westminster rule book; or they could play safe, hang fire and trust that the Scottish people would wait until England voted Labour too.

Labour was slow to address the problems or arguably the opportunities. No immediate challenge was mounted and, once the summer 'silly season' was over, the Conservatives strengthened in their resolve and embarked upon an active Scottish legislative programme. Impatience began to grow in Labour's ranks – and the predictable criticism of a vociferous Nationalist opposition and an assiduous Scottish Press soon took root in the cry of 'the Feeble Fifty'.

In August 1987 the then dominant 'left' pressure group, the Labour Co-ordinating Committee, hosted a well-attended one-day conference in Edinburgh on the question of the Scottish Mandate. Many of the thorny questions were beginning to be addressed. Could the battle be fought in Parliament alone? Should Labour be prepared to work alongside other political parties? How should the campaign against the poll tax be developed? What role was there for the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly?

There was a general acceptance of the need for Labour to use its strength in Scotland to challenge the government more effectively. Also gaining force was the call for Labour to have a special conference to examine the new political situation. But despite the presence of a host of influential party figures, few of the ideas thrown up were translated into action in the weeks that followed.

In the meantime the Party's Scottish Executive had launched a new campaigning initiative in the form of a 'Canvass for Scotland' of the Glasgow Cathcart and Garscadden constituencies. The fact that the vast majority of electors in two of Labour's safest seats told Party canvassers that they were in favour of a Scottish Assembly was not entirely unpredictable but it did show the Devolution issue was once again to the forefront of Labour's agenda.

September 1987 witnessed the Festival for Scottish Democracy. The

event, largely the brainchild of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), was designed to bring together the pro-devolution and anti-government forces from Scottish political and public life in a celebration of Scottish culture and in demand of a change to Scotland's system of government. In the event the occasion was marred by sectarian inter-party squabbles. The torrential rain which fell relentlessly on the day provided a convenient excuse as to why attendances and spirits were not higher.

This event was nonetheless significant in several respects. It demonstrated the emerging role of the STUC, under the leadership of Campbell Christie, as an increasingly influential force in Scottish politics. Its efforts to build broad based campaigning has become a feature of the Scottish political scene in recent years. It also exhibited a growing willingness on the part of the Labour Party to work on such terms. The refusal of the SNP to take part in the event and the eleventh hour withdrawal of the Alliance were also a timely reminder of the difficulties in building effective cross party cooperation.

Eventually, in November 1987 the party gathered in the Usher Hall, Edinburgh at a Special Conference to examine the way forward for the party in Scotland. This was to become one of the more forgettable Labour Movement gatherings in recent years. The sole topic of discussion was an eight page statement from the party's Scottish Executive, the sentiments and rhetoric were impressive but it was sadly lacking in suggestions as to how concrete short-term victories could be secured. Most notably it failed to refer to the fact, let alone address the problem, of the disparity between Labour's support north and south of the Border. It questioned the right of the Conservatives to foist unpopular policies on an unwilling Scottish people but pointed no way forward for Labour, stating:

The Labour Party in Scotland has the clear objective in the next four years of working for the return of a Labour government for the whole of the United Kingdom at the next election.

The problem was, what if the Scottish people could not – or would not – wait that long? Despite some dissent, the document was passed unamended.

The Conference coincided with the publication of Labour's much-heralded Scotland Bill. In the Statement to the Usher Hall Conference the Bill was described as "a campaigning tool for the whole Party". The statement continued:

We cannot expect it to be passed this time. Neither should the government – or the other parties – expect it to go away. It will remain as a standing reproach to the government for as long as they choose to ignore the wishes of the Scottish people.

On 27th January, 1988 the Bill was debated in Parliament and, as expected, voted down. But Labour's well laid plans to launch a campaign around its new proposals were overtaken by a well-timed government intervention in the Paisley Grammar affair. Labour's Bill quickly fell from the headlines. The decisive rejection of the Bill in Parliament on the same day as the government's demonstration of its ability to ride roughshod over the decision of a Labour Council served only to strengthen the claims of Labour's Nationalist opponents.

Although its public impact was limited, the Bill did represent a significant change in the substance of Labour's Devolution policy. The hallmarks of the new Bill were the economic teeth the Assembly would have, and its increased autonomy from Westminster. The Scottish Parliament would not be financed solely by the 'cap in hand' block grant system but would have powers to vary the rate of income tax. The Assembly would also control the electricity supply industry, the Scottish Development Agency, Highlands and Islands Development Board, and government intervention in industry, in addition to the Universities, manpower and training, forestry and the police.

Labour's 1978 Act had allowed Westminster a right of veto over Assembly legislation. The new Bill effectively removed this by giving virtual autonomy to the new Parliament unless it acted *ultra vires*. If Westminster disapproved of Assembly legislation, the Privy Council would be asked to adjudicate as to the Assembly's power to legislate.

The Bill proposed a 144-seat Assembly, with each of 71 Parliamentary Constituencies returning two members, and Orkney and Shetland returning one each. Elections in the fixed-term four-year Parliament would be by the first past the post system. The new Bill also proposed a significant diminution in the responsibilities of the Secretary of State, reducing the office to that of link between London and Edinburgh.

A central feature of the development of Labour's policy on home-rule is its incremental nature. In each new position statement the party quietly edged a few steps further down the Home Rule road. Only later, after the Govan by-election, did it break into a sprint.

Around this time debate was growing over Labour's attitude to the Poll Tax issue. It was to graphically illustrate the polarisation of views on the National Question. It was unusual to see the normally inaccessible subject of Local Government Finance featuring so centrally in the public eye and at the top of the political agenda.

Some of the proposed tactics were predictable. The Trotskyist and ultra-left sections of the party argued for a maximalist position of non-registration and non-payment and for Labour Councils not to implement

the tax or to pursue its collection. This view gained little ground. More significant was the groundswell of support which was developing for a Labour-led campaign of mass non-payment. The significance of this school of thought was its source. The major proponents of the non-payment position did not come from the 'hard left' of the Party and, if anything, many were best known for their outright opposition to such views in the past. These were people who were more likely to be found knocking doors for the party than selling fringe newspapers – why then were they now advocating that Labour should indeed 'go to the barricades'?

Fundamentally underpinning their argument was the belief that the Conservatives had no mandate to impose the tax in Scotland. It was argued that Labour could wield its own mandate to harness the massive opposition to the tax in a mass campaign of civil disobedience. Such a campaign, if successful, would challenge government legitimacy to an extent that even an intransigent Conservative administration could not ignore.

Labour's 'Stop It' campaign – although successful in gaining a high profile – contrasted sharply with the SNP's 'Can Pay Won't Pay' campaign. There could be no question in anyone's mind that Labour was opposed to the tax – the question was what were they going to do about it?

As the 1988 Party Conference approached the debate polarised. At a Conference held by the Labour Co-ordinating Committee traditional left allies remained divided. The proponents of the 'No Mandate' argument were becoming increasingly frustrated at the unwillingness of established left groupings and individuals to take up the National Question and, in their view, the avoidance of the fraught question of the poll tax was further evidence of such reluctance. Despite a well timed initiative from 'Stop It' – who launched the 'Send It Back Campaign' on the eve of Party Conference – non-payment was a central theme at the Conference. The issue was resolved in the time-honoured tradition of deferring decision to a special Conference to be held in the Autumn.

The March 1988 Conference also saw the formation of a new grouping within the party, Scottish Labour Action (SLA). In many ways the organisation created a home for the growing viewpoint within the party frustrated by inaction on the Poll Tax issue. The founder members were not household names but were established constituency activists at the forefront of the non-payment campaign. Eventually about 200 activists joined. SLA won early support from MPs Dennis Canavan, Dick Douglas and Robin Cook, later joined by John McAllion, Willie McKelvey and George Galloway.

SLA was launched at a well attended fringe meeting in Perth on the Saturday evening of Conference. The main points of its founding statement called on the Labour Party in Scotland to:

- Assert Scotland's right to self-determination on such a basis as the people of Scotland themselves decide.
- Adopt the argument that the Conservative Party has no mandate in Scotland and to campaign on that basis.
- Support mass civil disobedience in Scotland as a legitimate means of protest for the Scottish people (in particular non-payment of the Poll Tax).
- Encourage the early establishment of an alternative democratic forum in Scotland.

The statement also supported a policy of tactical non-cooperation with the government in the conduct of Scottish Business in the House of Commons and for the Scottish Party to have greater autonomy over its own affairs, free from Walworth Road interference.

Enthusiasm for SLA's position was spurred on by the reaction to the customary address to Conference by the Party Leader. In a long, rambling and, it must be said, singularly uninspiring speech on the Friday afternoon of Conference Neil Kinnock failed to refer to the issue of devolution, gave scant reference to the poll tax and did not, as had been expected, pay tribute to or even mention the achievement of the Scottish Party in his first address in Scotland since the General Election. He was also scathing about the possibility of working with other political parties, especially the Nationalists, which came in stark contrast to the address made earlier in the day by STUC General Secretary Campbell Christie.

In a television interview that evening Kinnock succeeded in adding insult to injury. When questioned on his failure to mention devolution he responded that there were several other issues he had not mentioned such as "environmental conditions in the Himalayas". And in answer to a question on the possibility of supporting a Constitutional Convention – at that time just emerging as an issue – he said he would find it difficult to imagine there being much support for such an idea.

On 13th July, 1988 the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly (CSA) published *A Claim of Right for Scotland*, setting out their proposals for the establishment of a Constitutional Convention as a forum for the development of an agreed system of Scottish government. Labour's initial reaction to its publication was guarded, in line with previous party responses to CSA initiatives.

Throughout the early 1980s the Labour Party had exhibited a certain ambivalence to the CSA and, more particularly, to the idea of a

Convention. There had been frequent calls for the party to affiliate to the CSA but they had always been rejected. The Executive Report to the 1983 Labour Party Scottish Conference recorded that such a course of action would not be possible given guidance from the party's UK headquarters on the general subject of affiliations. The Report continued "...however it was hoped that contact could be maintained."

The CSA has had, from its inception, a large number of active Labour Party members within its ranks but the Labour Party has only ever been represented officially by observers.

The issue of a Constitutional Convention was first considered by the Labour Party's Scottish Executive at a meeting in June 1986, following the publication of proposals from the CSA. The Party's response merits reproduction without comment:

We have considered the CSA proposal for a Constitutional Convention. Since we believe that a Labour government will be formed after the next Election with a firm commitment to establish a Scottish Assembly, such a Convention is considered to be unnecessary....Only in the unlikely event of Labour not winning the next election, could the party then assess its reaction to the proposal.

The Labour Party gave a guarded welcome to the 1988 *The Claim of Right* document describing it as "...a major contribution to thinking on constitutional change in Scotland." The official party statement emphasised, however, that "any major decision by the Scottish Party on a matter of such importance would need to be taken by full Conference in March next year."

Although the CSA, and Labour enthusiasts for the Convention, were pleased with the Party's response – there had been some doubt whether it would be so positive – they were concerned at the timetable it implied. The CSA had privately hoped that the Convention would meet by early 1989. Had Labour insisted on its original timetable it would have knocked this target back considerably. In the event such a delay was not necessary.

The August meeting of Labour's Scottish Executive agreed to undertake an internal consultation exercise on *The Claim of Right* proposals. Submissions were to be considered by the Executive's November meeting. But the decision was overshadowed by another major row. The same meeting agreed a statement for presentation to the September Special Conference on the Poll Tax. The Executive voted by a margin of only two votes to reject non-payment as an option.

As if the party did not have enough to contend with, then came the unexpected appointment of Bruce Millan to the post of EC Commissioner.

At this stage the prospect of a by-election in one of the party's safest seats, Glasgow Govan, seemed to be of little cause for concern.

Before a by-election date was set, the Party gathered in Govan Town Hall for its special Conference on the Poll Tax. The Conference was a highly charged affair. The non-payment camp, although commanding majority support among delegates, was defeated by the block votes of the big trade unions. It was felt by many that the 'non-payers' had won the debate but lost the vote. Significantly, the biggest union, the Transport and General Workers (TGWU), despite pressure from their UK leadership and the Scottish Party establishment, lined up behind the non-payment banner. The Conference provided the best example to date of the realignment taking place in the Scottish Party. The debate was not just about tactics on the poll tax but about challenging the legitimacy of Conservative rule in Scotland.

Then on 10th November, came the Govan by-election. It was not an easy task to transform a 19,504 majority into a 3,554 deficit in a three week campaign, but Labour managed it in Govan. It is insufficient to blame the candidate factor for Labour's defeat. Bob Gillespie was no Jack Kennedy but the party's malaise in Govan was far more deep-rooted. The electorate saw in Labour an inability to deliver for Scotland. The SNP message that the 'Fighting Fifty' were feeble hit home. It was felt also that the election of just another Labour MP would do little for Scotland's interests.

The Poll Tax symbolised Labour's dilemma – its 50 MPs were unable to stop the tax. The contrast between Labour and SNP policy on the question of payment gave credence to the electorate's doubts about Labour, as evidenced by a BBC/NOP Exit Poll conducted on the day of the by-election.

Fifty-five per cent of the voters questioned said the performance of Scotland's Labour MPs was either 'Poor' or 'Very Poor', while the effective representation of Scotland's interests was said by 32% to be the single most important issue in the by-election. A further 21% of the respondents identified the Poll Tax as the most important issue, and 32% said they supported a non-payment campaign. Ironically, Labour's policy on Home Rule – giving greater power to Scotland within the framework of the UK – met with most favour among the electorate.

Two other factors should also be recorded as influential; party organisation and the party's standing in the UK Polls. Compared to the well-oiled SNP machine Labour's penny-farthing approach was lamentable. Labour patently failed to turn out party workers in any real numbers when the SNP simply swamped the constituency. The SNP message that Labour could not win the General Election was reinforced by the level of Labour's UK support. Every national opinion poll from the end of June until polling day itself had the Conservatives ahead.

Critics of Labour's Govan strategy argued that the by-election was fought like a General Election campaign on UK issues against a Conservative enemy – and not as a single by-election in a Scottish constituency where the main opposition were Nationalists. Labour was not to make the same mistake again.

Only two days after the Govan debacle Labour's Scottish Executive met to discuss the Convention consultation exercise. It has been suggested that Labour only entered the Convention because of the Govan result. This is untrue. Donald Dewar, during the by-election, had given his strongest support to the Convention to date. And by the time the Executive met on 12th November, of the twenty seven responses which had been submitted at that stage, only two were opposed to the party's participation.

Whatever the outcome of the by-election, Labour would still have entered the Convention, but the Govan defeat propelled the party into the project with an enthusiasm and speed which might not otherwise have happened. (See discussion in Article by Iain Macwhirter).

Govan concentrated Labour' mind. The decision on the Convention, coming when it did, offered Labour the prime opportunity to prove that it did have Scottish interests at heart and was willing to take steps to further them without waiting for a Westminster Labour victory.

Less than a week after the result Campbell Christie delivered a forthright speech at the STUC Women's Conference in Perth which was to foreshadow many of the later discussions within the party about the Convention itself. He said the first priority for the people of Scotland was a Scottish Parliament....not just to cover the areas within the 1978 Act, but also economic affairs and European affairs. When they had that, he went on, they could then go on and thoroughly examine the option of Independence. Significantly, he also called on Labour to return to its 1931 commitment to proportional representation. He admitted afterwards that he was "immensely out of step" with party thinking but said his views were supported by many at the grass roots.

These views should be contrasted sharply with comments made the same day by Deputy Leader Roy Hattersley, one of the main architects of Labour's policy on regional government. At a shadow Cabinet meeting in the appropriate surroundings of a Union convalescent home at Rottingdean, Hattersley, commenting on the Govan result, said that Labour was on the right track in Scotland.

Resolutions for the Scottish Conference in March were published at the end of November. Seventeen motions appeared under the agenda heading 'Scottish Assembly/Scottish Constitutional Convention'. Eight of

those – including one from the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) – demanded support for a Constitutional Convention. Others, including the TGWU, called for the party "to consider the establishment of an Assembly.. and to actively pursue this matter with the STUC and CSA."

Trade Union backing would ensure massive support for the Convention at Inverness, but there was a time bomb ticking in half a dozen resolutions which was to explode into the major debate at Conference itself – the SLA-sponsored position on 'the dual mandate'. The resolutions stated:

"In the event of there having been no progress towards an Assembly by the next General Election, the Labour Party in Scotland will seek a specific mandate from the Scottish people, considering the election of a majority of Labour MPs in Scotland as a mandate for the establishment of an Assembly".

This concept immediately sent shivers around the party establishment in Scotland and elements of what had been regarded hitherto as the 'old-guard left' on the Scottish Executive.

Following Govan, SNP poll ratings began to soar; Labour began to toughen its image as the national party of Scotland. In a demonstration of Labour's new found enthusiasm for the Convention, Donald Dewar, the spectre of Govan hanging over his shoulder, called for talks with the pro-Convention parties to lay the ground for an official cross-party meeting in January.

Then, in an unprecedented show of opposition unity, on the 20th December, that most conventional of politicians was at the forefront of the most unconventional act of this Parliament. Donald Dewar led all of Scotland's opposition MPs out of the Commons in a protest over the government's failure to set up a Scottish Select Committee. Whilst Labour activists were pleased by their leader's Parliamentary gesture, some were asking – why not on the Poll Tax, or the new Education Bill, or Scottish Homes?

Just prior to this, the doubts started about the SNP's total commitment to the goal of a united Convention. Whipped up by post-Govan euphoria, they set a series of negotiating points as a basis for their participation.

One week before the cross-party meeting, the SNP achieved its highest opinion poll rating in 12 years – at 32% they were only four points behind Labour. Eventually, the SNP all but walked out of the cross-party meeting on 27th January, their final decision coming in March. The scene was set for Labour to assume centre stage – they would make the Convention a reality.

Soon Donald Dewar was to introduce a new twist to the debate. In a television interview just one week before the party Conference he surprised almost everyone by announcing that the solution to Scotland's problems was "Independence in the UK". Only when he repeated the phrase did it become apparent that this was no slip of the tongue. The Labour Party vocabulary was evolving to mirror its thinking. By now it was implicitly accepted that 'devolution' was dead and that even Labour Party members could talk of 'Home Rule' without being dismissed as closet nationalists. But for the Shadow Secretary of State to use the word 'Independence', that was novel indeed. It was later explained that the slogan did not represent a significant departure from existing party policy but was rather "a different, more imaginative way of presenting the package".

In the week preceding Conference, SLA launched a major policy document. *A New Agenda for Labour in Scotland* was a distillation of the organisation's ideas and policy and helped set the tone for the Conference itself. The most controversial section of the pamphlet, on the 'dual mandate', received widespread media coverage provoking hostile reaction from the party establishment. SLA also raised the banner of a 'constitutionally guaranteed' Assembly, echoing a call by Jim Ross, the author of *The Claim of Right* and behind-the-scenes architect of Labour's Devolution Bills. This was later to find its way into the Party's Policy Review document.

By the time Labour gathered in Inverness, it was firmly immersed in the now developing Convention project and support for the Convention received a straightforward rubber stamp. Had anyone in the hall ever doubted the worth of the Convention? It was hard to believe that they had. Even the Party Leader had come to Inverness via Damascus. In stark contrast to his previous visit Neil Kinnock embraced the Convention project with an enthusiasm which had to be seen to be believed and offered his most far-reaching and forthright support ever for the concept of Scottish Home Rule.

The debate which aroused the most interest was over the 'dual mandate'. Supporters of the position argued that Labour should not put all its eggs in the one 'Westminster victory only' basket. Labour, they said, should work on a range of strategies to cope with whatever result emerged at the next General Election. By definition this included the possibility of a fourth consecutive Labour defeat. The predictable cries of 'traitors' and 'defeatists' were not long in coming. Brian Wilson MP in fact argued that those who championed this view were adding to the likelihood of it happening. It had been assumed that the dual mandate position was assured of defeat. In the event, however, the Executive backed remission of the resolution, so keeping it on the table for another year.

Another SLA-sponsored debate arose around the demand for internal

party devolution. This issue is an old chestnut in the Labour Party in Scotland, having been raised as early as the 1920s. On this occasion it floundered when a row erupted over the question of the control of party staff. It is paradoxical that a party committed to the transference of power from Westminster finds it difficult to contemplate devolving control from Walworth Road.

On 30th March the first meeting of the Scottish Constitutional Convention took place. There were empty seats where the Conservatives and the SNP had been invited to sit. All Labour's elected Scottish representatives – from national and local government – were gathered together along with the Democrats, the Churches and a wide range of representatives from Scottish political and public life. And there, on the Mound, one by one they put their names to the declaration of sovereignty – putting the will of the Scottish people first. The Rubicon had been crossed.

Donald Dewar promised, when launching Labour's Policy Review in Scotland in May, that Labour's self-government policies would ensure "proper independence" for Scotland. The *Meet the Challenge Make the Change* document took Labour even further forward in entrenching the position of an Assembly. It stated:

"There must be no possibility of Constitutional pressure (on the assembly) on the election of a hostile government. We are determined to entrench the powers of an Assembly..."

The review also contained a novel scheme, first mooted at the party's Scottish Local Government Conference in January – the so-called 'reverse block grant' which would beef up the Assembly's economic muscle. The Assembly would gather all direct taxes in Scotland and Westminster's share would be remitted after collection.

The tragic death of Bob McTaggart caused a by-election in Glasgow Central. It is fair to say that, having just been through Govan, the party did not relish the prospect of another such contest. The party decided to hold the by-election on June 15th – the same day as the European elections.

A number of factors contributed to Labour's victory in Glasgow Central. By far the most important was that the party, for the first time in many a long day, was able to say with conviction it could win the General Election – and be believed. Victories in the Vale of Glamorgan and the County Council elections, Labour's National poll ratings and a successful Policy Review launch all reinforced that belief.

Labour attacked 'Independence in Europe' with a vengeance, portraying the SNP as self-interested sectarians in contrast with Labour's having real Scottish interests at heart.

The success of the Glasgow Central campaign, Conservative national disarray and the perception of Labour as the next party of Government contributed to the party's success in the Euro Elections. For the time being at least Labour had popped the Nationalist genie back in the bottle. It was left to Alex Salmond to summarise the election campaign; Labour, he said, had had its best ten days for ten years.

At the time of writing, this chapter of Labour's history remains incomplete. Developments over the months – and indeed years to come – will be the ultimate judge of Labour's ability to respond effectively to the National Question. The Convention has set itself a mighty task, nothing less than a detailed blueprint for the future governance of Scotland, and in the short-term a number of urgent and contentious matters require to be addressed.

Labour must formulate a view on which electoral system it favours for an Assembly. There is no easy answer. If Labour opts for the status quo it runs the risk of causing the break up of the Convention – the Democrats have already threatened to withdraw if the agreed package does not include proportional representation. The attitude of the Greens and non-party representatives – particularly from outwith the Central Belt – will also have to be taken into account.

Even if the Convention could be held together on this basis, such a decision would be likely to weaken a Home Rule scheme. The fear would still remain of an Assembly dominated by Edinburgh Councillors and Glasgow Lawyers – or, worse still, by Glasgow Councillors and Edinburgh Lawyers.

If, on the other hand, Labour opts for change – which system would the party adopt? There are serious implications to be considered. Not least is the consideration that Labour may fail to gain a majority of assembly seats. Moreover any such decision would undoubtedly have ramifications for the party south of the Border.

Labour must also add flesh to the bones of its plans for increased economic powers for an Assembly. Will it embrace the concept of the precept? If so, what of the question of varying direct taxes? How *precisely* would the level of reverse block grant be calculated? And what would Shadow Chancellor John Smith say to a demand that the Assembly should retain at least a slice of oil fund revenues from the North Sea? What about local government? A consensus is emerging in support of a single-tier system, but how large should the authorities be and where should the boundaries be drawn?

The Party will also have to respond to the growing demand for

increased representation for women in the new Parliament. Should it embrace quotas as part of the party's selection mechanism? Or will it accept the demand of the STUC Women's Committee, and Scotland's only woman Labour MP, for each Assembly Constituency to elect one man and one woman to represent it?

These are only *some* of the major questions the Party must decide upon before a final scheme can be arrived at. Labour has exhibited a clear determination to overcome these hurdles but it has yet to face the biggest test of any scheme. How, and under what circumstances, will it be implemented?

In the first instance the Convention scheme will have to be widely popularised. If Thatcher is saying 'No' then the Scottish people will have to be seen to say a resounding 'YES'. And, if so, yes to what? Will all the options – from the status quo through to separatism – be put to the people? And if this is to be done by a referendum how will it work and who will pay for it?

Having signed the Declaration of Sovereignty the Party has asserted that the will of the Scottish people is paramount. Labour cannot now return to the 'business as usual' approach of 1987. It has implicitly acknowledged that a Westminster Labour victory need not be a pre-requisite to securing constitutional change for Scotland.

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